

SCARAVELLI YOGA, REFLECTIONS ALONG THE PATH by Caroline Lang

Beginning In the beginning, perhaps what is enjoyed the most is an approach to yoga pervaded with kindness and care and that yet it is moving and strong. We are gently being asked to relax. This can become, of course, a way of being. We are invited to challenge our impulse to fix and mend, impose and push and give ear to the intelligence of the body. Dancing with gravity and lightness, inside and out, movement and stillness, openness and autonomy, we start to align with our deepest centre. A depth that can be felt viscerally, seem sometimes tangible, sometimes elusive and which language may struggle to define. Within the experience of balancing what may appear to be opposites there can arise a feeling of unusual harmony and a sense of softening beyond our sometimes rather limited version of life. Life is full of paradox and mystery which words can only point to but the body itself can understand.

Discovering the core of the body The focus is not on executing postures but upon discoveries. Resisting the temptation to stretch, hold the body up or just to do things in a habitual way we can learn to undo the grip of dominant muscles, accessing the core of the body, the spine, deeper muscles and a relationship to the body much more refined and subtle. We find a different kind of support. Over and over we coax the body free, feel how the different parts of the body relate to one another and the freedom that is experienced when the expression of the body is not separate from the ground. Our bodies and our minds can be dense, tense, fragmented and it can take an enormous amount of a gentle awareness to unravel our movements and reveal what can feel like a body within the body, the one that breathes deeply, is happier and orientates around ease.

Centredness We work from the outside in and the inside out, bringing intelligence to all the big and small parts of the body so they are involved in a realisation of apparent centredness. The journey cannot be underestimated. It is not always easy and along the way we meet all sorts of obstacles in the body and entanglements of the mind. It is a process of embodiment, not trying to escape, requiring '*infinite time and no ambition*' This can be difficult to grasp in our culture. A very particular effort is required and patience and courage and love.

Gravity Simply gazing at photos of Vanda practicing yoga I think we all observe a quality very beautiful '*When the abandonment to gravity comes into action, resistance ceases, fear vanishes, order is regained, nature starts again to function in its natural rhythm and the body is able to blossom fully, allowing the river of life to flow freely through all its parts*'. It really is like receiving a gift when we start to dance inside, when the body can accept gravity and experience lightness as a rebound. Gravity takes hold of us through our bodies and in the tending to the details and commitments of our lives. Like an ever-present gravity field, the great process of life calls from near and far for us to respond over and over each in our own unique way. There is beauty and freedom when we are true to our own being.

Breath *‘Breathing is the essence of yoga’*. As the body frees itself, so the lungs open. We can breathe more naturally, less interfering with the grateful wave-like movements of our lungs, the ebb and flow of our whole body as we breathe in and out. Breathing deeply, without forcing, generates a feeling of aliveness and well-being. There are many breathing practices to explore, best when they begin at the meeting point between awareness and breath. When volition subsides and we are quiet enough to experience the magic of the breath breathing itself, it becomes a gateway into surrender and calm that is full of new potential.

The Spine In the introduction to her book, Vanda describes a radically different way of approaching yoga practice and understanding the body. *‘A revolution has to take place. A revolution based on one very simple physical truth.. There is a division in the centre of our back, where the spine moves simultaneously in two opposite directions’*. She says that *‘elongation and extension can occur when the pulling and pushing have come to an end’*. As we begin, we may not feel the spine clearly, rather lots of tension and tight muscles, we may forget that the spine has a front as well as a back, flowing like a river through the core of our body. Impossible to predict, but soon or eventually with wholehearted and consistent practice, the spine can develop a life of its own and a life of new relationship, to the ground, space around and to all the other parts of the body. Our movements open from the spine, bring us back to the spine and within that dynamic there is an inherent feeling of goodness and profound connection.

Going Around To stay alive to the heart of this yoga practice we continually revolve our awareness around to come to what we are doing from a fresh perspective. The focus keeps changing. Feet soften, feet gather and collect. Sometimes we leave the breath alone, sometimes we attune to and play with it. The spine releases towards to ground, the spine reaches towards the sky like a tree. It is a process, not linear. Interest, curiosity and commitment allow us to change, open up possibilities. We are continually letting go of ideas, coming back to the body and starting afresh. This yoga is not a method.

Listening and rhythm This all requires a never-ending listening, an attitude of being rather than doing, so we become the ‘letting go’, trusting that our movements can unfold in an effortless way. In stillness and in movement we awake to subtle movements in the body and breath. Learning when to rest, when to respond, when to flow for a bit, we uncover our own inherent rhythm. As the capacity to listen inwardly becomes more embedded, so we start to hear more vividly the world around us and what it has to teach and to be fully able to listen to our friends.

Awareness It is a practice of awareness, opening inner eyes, the presence of a person in the body, refining of a felt-sense. Not observing the body as if from somewhere else but awareness suffusing, blending with the body. We learn to feel our way into the body, using simple concepts, metaphors, images to point us inward, of these we eventually let go encountering the natural spaciousness of true meditation. The practice becomes more and more simple as the body and breath are experienced directly. In the beginning we are not even aware of how much our mind takes control. Eventually the accumulated wisdom of practice becomes stronger than our mind habits.

Unity All spiritual traditions tend to emphasise the need to let go of the impulses of the ego and surrender to a state of being less self-centred and more spacious. As Vanda said '*not a practice the ego can use*'. Yoga purifies us, clearer seeing arises so that we can reach out beyond our small agendas which create the illusion of a fragmented life, to feel our place amidst the family of things. What a relief when we open beyond the anxiety of taking ourselves to be separate from the rest of the universe and start to experience the unity that yoga defines.

Intimacy and love An amazing intimacy with all things is the blessing of this yoga practice, and the ability to stay steady when life brings challenges, to live creatively and with joy. As we simplify, our lives become more honest. As we awaken so we feel more deeply the dazzling impermanence of our days so they become more infinitely precious. We understand with greater compassion what it is to be human, to be on our unique journey from life to death, to trust and to shine within our world and live a life that responds to the profound. This yoga melts us just enough through the body that without effort we can direct the heart towards love.

Transformation I appreciate how this practice transforms when I reflect upon my life, that I was drawn along an interesting pathway with no idea as to where it would lead, a journey much greater than the sum of all its different parts. So many friendships have been made along the way, I feel healthier and have more equanimity than ever before. There is something very humbling and liberating about giving all to what I do. The more I teach the more I feel just how much people long for space, a place of rest where something other than our conditioning and the surface demands of life can be heard. This practice is like a gentle breeze blowing in the opposite direction to the complexity of modern life.

I listen to the questions students ask and the amazing insights they share and the delight they express when they let go of the need to be in control and become more playful.. It all takes time but people do discover the value of more rest, back-aches disappear and illnesses go away. Transformation comes to the patient. As we grow closer to ourselves, so we can watch the sun-rise and the stars sparkling at night with a wider, clearer mind, stop rushing around and then we can both encounter the weight of life's messages and step back a little to allow it all to unfold. As a good friend often reminds me

'Life is a dream, of course, as we all know, but one to be dreamt in earnest even so'